



CEG study in corrections: A collaboration between three community agencies

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Summary

Pixie's Pen Pals is a partnership between FETCH-a-Cure and the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC). The program brings dogs into state prisons and teaches inmates to become animal handlers. The Pen Pals program has several goals. It is designed to (a) lower the rate of euthanasia in Virginia's animal shelters; (b) provide job skills to inmates; (c) promote the rehabilitation of inmates; (d) provide well trained dogs for adoption; and (e) help promote a less tense correctional center environment while improving communication between the correctional center staff and inmates. Currently, inmates at several Virginia correctional centers train and socialize rescue dogs with guidance and instruction from professional dog trainers. Although a small body of literature addresses the beneficial impacts of bringing dogs and inmates together, formal evaluation studies have only been recommended, not yet conducted.

Given this gap, two basic cross-sectional studies are proposed as a means to pilot measures, investigate outcomes, and gather data that can lay the groundwork for future investigations. A cross-sectional study will explore whether there are group-level differences between participants enrolled in Pen Pals programming (n=45) and a matched sample of general population inmates (n=100). The primary

outcome variable is trait-based anxiety. Secondary variables include inmate loneliness and perceived sleep quality. Covariates will be attitudes toward pets and a measure of functional health.

A parallel cross-sectional study will examine whether there are group-level differences between VADOC staff who work closely with Pen Pals participants (n=45) and a matched sample of VADOC staff who have little contact with the program (n=45). VADOC staff will be matched on gender, age, ethnicity, DOC job title, years in current position, and VADOC site after all data are collected. The primary outcome variable is perceived organizational support.

Through these methods, the presenters will examine the process of human-animal interaction and how, in this case, this interaction attenuates some of the socio-emotional impacts of incarceration and of inmates' previous interpersonal trauma.

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